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# EARLY THEATRE IN ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN 1835-1900

By M. Alma Josenhans*

Since I have been thrilled about the theatre almost all my life, and have been busy compiling a history of the theatre in Detroit for fifteen years, I was interested to receive a copy of Clara Behringer's thesis, A History of the Theatre in Ann Arbor, Michigan, from the Beginnings to 1904, which she prepared in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctor's degree from the University of Michigan. Not long after pouring over this paper, I was requested to give this paper on the Early Theatre in Ann Arbor. My first thought was to read Miss Behringer's list of all the plays and actors connected with the early theatre here; then I realized that no one could be as interested as I to hear a list of a thousand plays and a couple of thousand actors. I then put together a story about one hundred actors, and was advised by my family that it was much too long. The present version has been cut down to include only the very cream of the visiting entertainers with some anecdotes about them. The years covered in this paper are from 1835 to 1900.

When I look back, it seems amazing that it was only 128 years ago that the boundaries of Washtenaw County were marked, and that there was no public means of transportation in Michigan until 1822, when the first stage line was established. Two years later, in 1824, Ann Arbor was founded. In that same year the first corduroy road was laid from Detroit to Ann Arbor. Traveling was hazardous in those pioneer days. Corduroy roads were built by laying limbs of trees crosswise on the road. The branches were chopped off, but occasionally stumps were left sticking up, and when the wagons went over them the axles often broke, dumping the passengers out. Such was the experience of many an actor, traveling from one western town to the other. The roads were always in bad condition, either thick with suffocating dust or almost impassable on account of mud.

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* Miss Josenhans, an Ann Arbor resident, took her library training at the Drexel Library School in Philadelphia; has been on the staff of the Detroit Public Library from 1912 to 1950, was for 27 years First Assistant in its Music & Drama Department; devoted 15 years to compiling a Theatre History of Detroit covering the years 1816-1864, the results of which, in 20 typed volumes, are deposited in the Detroit Public Library.

It has been said (George Jessel) that "Good speeches, like good socks, depend on the yarns you use." This yarn appeared in an early Detroit paper. A man was walking alongside a very muddy road, and he saw a cap in the mud. He picked it up and discovered a man's head under the cap. "Can't I help you, old chap?" he cried. "No, thanks," replied the traveler, "I've got a good horse under me!" Under such conditions one can imagine that it took courage and endurance to bring a circus to Ann Arbor in September, 1835, only eleven years after the founding of the town. This was the first entertainment recorded in the local papers.

Two years later the first amateur performance took place. (I shall speak of the amateur stage later.) The first professional performance occurred 20 years after Ann Arbor was settled. The first legitimate, or professional group of actors to appear was one headed by Garry Hough, William Scovill, and Isaac Singer Merritt. They came on October 7, 1844, and performed two plays, The Drunkard's Warning and Shakespeare's Richard III. Merritt later changed his name to Singer, invented the sewing machine which bears his name, and made a profitable business out of it, certainly a more lucrative occupation than being an itinerant player. The admission to those early plays was 25 cents.

Garry Hough has written of his life as an actor. He tells about some reformed drunkards who preached temperance all over the country and started the "Washington movement." This inspired an editor of a Rochester, New York, paper to write two temperance dramas, one being The Drunkard's Warning, which was the first play to be given in Ann Arbor. After the show, temperance pledges were passed among the audience, and Mr. Hough boasted that many names were obtained for the cause. There were no theatres, no opera houses in those days, nothing but halls and they were generally attached to hotels and used for balls and other social gatherings. The traveling companies carried their own scenery. In order to reach Michigan from the east, they came by way of the Erie Canal, and Lake Erie to Detroit.

In Ann Arbor there were no theatres, either. The first play was given in the Court House, then, as now, on Main Street, but facing Ann Street. Later companies performed in the Franklin House, which was on the southwest corner of Huron and Main Streets, and in Exchange Hall, on the southwest corner of Ann and Main. On this site the first theatre was erected in 1871. It was first called the Hill Opera House, later became the Whitney Opera House, and is still standing.

I was interested to note what a long time elapsed between the first performance in 1844 and the next, in 1849, for there had been several lively years in Detroit during that period when the theatre was open from January to December. The reason for this lack of entertainmant in Ann Arbor must have been that it had no resident company to support the traveling stars. In Detroit there was such a company from the beginning, 1833, through the 1860's.

It has been said (George Jessel) that "Good speeches, like good smoke, depend on the yarns you use." This yarn happened in an early Detroit paper. A man was walking along a very muddy road, and he saw a cap in the mud. He picked it up and discovered a man's head under the cap. "Can't I help you, old chap?" he cried. "No, thanks," replied the traveler, "I've got a good horse under me!" Under such conditions one can imagine that it took courage and endurance to bring a circus to Ann Arbor in September, 1895, only seven years after the founding of the town. This was the first entertainment recorded in the local papers.

Two years later the first amateur performances took place. (I shall speak of the amateur stage later.) The first professional performance occurred 20 years after Ann Arbor was settled. The first legitimate, or professional group of actors to appear was one headed by Harry Hough, William Sodrill, and Isaac Singer Merritt. They came on October 7, 1844, and performed two plays, The Drunkard's Warning and Shakespeare's Richard III. Merritt later changed his name to Singer, invented the sewing machine which bears his name, and made a profitable business out of it, certainly a more lucrative occupation than being an itinerant player. The admission to those early plays was 25 cents.

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In Ann Arbor there were no theatres, either. The first play was given in the Court House, then, as now, on Main Street, but facing Ann Street. Later companies performed in the Franklin House, which was on the northwest corner of Huron and Main Streets, and in Exchange Hall, on the southwest corner of Ann and Main. On this site the Michigan Theatre was erected in 1871. It was first called the Hill Opera House, later became the Whitney Opera House, and is still standing.

I was interested to note what a long time elapsed between the first performance in 1844 and the next, in 1849, for there had been several lively weeks in Detroit during that period when the theatre was open from January to December. The reason for this lack of entertainment in Ann Arbor must have been that it had no resident company to support the traveling stars. In Detroit there was such a company from the beginning, 1837, through the 1840's.

So Ann Arbor had to wait until a complete unit decided to brave the bad traveling conditions and come this way. It was 5 years after the Hough troupe came here that the second company arrived. January 8, 1849, the stock company of the National Theatre of Detroit, headed by William Ellis and Joseph Parker, performed at the Franklin House. They gave The Lady of Lyons (Bulwer Lytton), Pizzaro (Kotzebue-Sheridan), and again Richard III. Joseph Parker was a well known figure in the western circuit. He was typical of a certain type,- the low comedian. He wore large-checked trousers and had a very red nose. He was a jolly person and liked to tell jokes and ask conundrums. One of the latter was, "What becomes of all the pins?" "Don't know? Then I'll tell you. They go down to earth and become terrapins!"

Two years later, on May 2-3, 1851, the first minstrel show came to town. Minstrel shows were very popular at this time, and remained so for 25 years or more. One of the best was West and Peel's original Campbell Minstrels. They gave clever skits and burlesques, comical songs and dances of the old buck-and-wing variety. The show was kept clean, so the Ann Arbor ladies were informed, so that they would not be offended if they attended the performances.

Later that year, July 18, 1851, the Mackensie Company appeared with G. J. (Elder) Adams as leading man. Adams had achieved quite a reputation as an actor before he joined the Mormon Colony on Beaver Island, Michigan, where he ranked as King Strong's second in command. He left the colony and became a preacher in the east, was defrocked, and returned to the stage. The plays given in 1851 were The Iron Chest (Colman), Douglas (Home), and Richard III,- for the third time in Ann Arbor.

Charlotte Crampton* came to Ann Arbor in 1851. She was a person about whom I should like to write a book, as she was perhaps the most exciting and unpredictable among a colorful lot of actors. She began her theatrical career at the age of 15 in Cincinnati, and appeared in Detroit in 1833 with the first theatrical company to perform in that city. What stamina and courage it must have taken to travel in those early days! But Charlotte Crampton had it. She was rich in personality, full of vitality, and interested in her work. She was well known in the south and west, and was called "the little Siddons of the West," because she was a correct reader and had good judgement in acting. She had a strong voice and loved to play men's parts. In Ann Arbor, on December 9, 1851, the company performed The Hunchback (Knowles), Lucretia Borgia (Hugo), and again Richard III was given,- this for the fourth time within seven years.

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* Charlotte Crampton, born 1816.

So Ann Arbor had to wait until a complete unit decided to brave the bad traveling conditions and come this way. It was 5 years after the Booth troupe came here that the second company arrived. Jamison and Hall's Combination, the company of the National Theatre of Detroit, headed by William Hall and Joseph Parker, performed at the Franklin House. They gave The Lady of Lyons (Bulwer Lytton), Fazzaro (Kotzebue-Sheridan), and again Richard III. Joseph Parker was a well known player in the western circuit. He was typical of a certain type - the John Gomedian. He wore large-checked trousers and had a very red nose. He was a jolly person and liked to tell jokes and ear splitting puns. One of his favorite puns was: "What becomes of all the other words I don't know. They fall in fall you. They go down to earth and become terrapins!"

Two years later, on May 2-3, 1851, the first minstrel show came to town. Minstrel shows were very popular at this time, and remained so for 25 years or more. One of the best was West and Pool's Ethiopian Minstrels. They gave clever skits and burlesques, comedy songs and dances of the old buck-and-wing variety. The show was kept clean, so the Ann Arbor ladies were informed, so that they could not be offended if they attended the performances.

Later that year, July 16, 1851, the Blackmoria Company appeared with G. T. Fox and Adams as leading men. Adams had achieved quite a reputation as an actor before he joined the Barnum Colony on Beaver Island, Michigan, where he died. He was fifty. Fox's second in command, Mr. Ira Mills, could sing and became a preacher in the east, was defrocked, and returned to the stage. The plays given in 1851 were The Iron Chest (Colman), Douglas (Home), and Richard III - for the third time in Ann Arbor.

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* Charlotte Crampton, born 1836.

Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote Uncle Tom's Cabin as a novel in 1852. She could not protect her rights, as there were no copyright laws governing dramas, so later in the year the first dramatic version was written by Clifton Tayleur and performed. Two years later, March 24-25, 1854, the play was produced in Ann Arbor for the first time.

Hangsterfer's Hall, which was located over a store on the southwest corner of Washington and Main Streets, was first used in 1860. It was the scene of many plays and other entertainments. On May 20, 1870, the W. M. Holland Company brought Edwin Forrest* with his leading lady, Miss Lillie, to this hall in the play Richelieu. Forrest was a mountain of a man with a great husky voice which was capable of moving his audience to tears or exaltation. He had a temper which he often exhibited on the stage, as he did once in Detroit when a local boy, playing a walk-on part, got so interested in looking for his friends in the gallery that he didn't notice that his comrades had left and that he was alone with Forrest. When the audience began to titter Forrest was so enraged that he kicked the super right off the stage. Forrest was considered the first great tragic actor in America. For many years he reigned supreme. Then styles in acting changed from the flamboyant to the more natural kind, and Forrest was criticized for "the old rant, the old stage stride, the old gurgling sound in the throat." Though he had not the same prestige that he formerly had, one can imagine that it was still an exciting event to hear him as the Cardinal of Bulwer Lytton's creation. Just a year after giving Richelieu in Ann Arbor, Forrest died.

In 1871, Hill's Opera House was built on the site of the old Exchange, corner of Ann and Main Streets.

On February 10, 1873, Edwin Booth** made his first appearance here, supported poorly by the McVicker Company. They gave Hamlet. Edwin Booth was the son of the great tragic actor, Junius Brutus Booth, and was trained by his father in many of the roles in which Edwin was later to star. Edwin was not a large man; his countenance was pale, refined and handsome. In spite of the blows which life dealt him, he was said to have kept a keen sense of humor. Among his great assets was the possession of a wonderful speaking voice, which was rich and melodious.

In her book, Family Circle, Cornelia Otis Skinner quotes from her father's impressions as follows: "No actor of his time so completely filled the eye, the ear, and the mind with an ideal of romantic tragedy as did Edwin Booth. Extravagance never marred his work...Never losing his own personality in his assumption, he yet conveyed the impression that he was the character. It was never with the dominating force of Forrest; the alchemy of Booth's art was more subtle. Although a small, even a frail man, I could swear that at times in Othello, and in Macbeth, he was seven feet tall.

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* Edwin Forrest, born 1806, debut 1820, died 1871.
** Edwin Booth, born 1833, debut 1849, died 1893.

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** Edwin Booth, born 1833, debut 1849, died 1893.

But as Shylock his body appeared shortened to stumpiness."

As Edwin was climbing to the heights of his professional career, his handsome brother, John Wilkes Booth, asassinated Abraham Lincoln. This was a terrible shock to Edwin, and he felt the disgrace keenly, retiring from the stage for a time. At last he was persuaded to return and carry on his good work. Coming under the management of Lawrence Barrett in 1887, he rose to new heights, and was conceded to be the greatest tragedian of his day. He performed Hamlet for 100 consecutive nights, establishing a record for that time. This remained unbroken until John Barrymore assumed the role and played Hamlet 101 times. When Booth appeared in Hamlet in Ann Arbor, in 1873, the University students were noisy, and several in the audience undertook to quiet them. Booth, still sensitive over his brother's mad act, thought they were hissing him. He was dreadfully worked up, but finally finished the play, then declared that he would never return to act in Ann Arbor. He kept his word for 15 years.

December 19, 1878, one of the most exciting theatrical events in years took place. Madame Helena Modjeska,* a Polish countess, made her first appearance in Ann Arbor. When she first came to America, in 1877, she spoke her lines in her native Polish tongue, the rest of the cast speaking in English. Later she conquered our language, and was soon considered in America, as she had been in Europe, only a little less important than Sarah Bernhardt. Modjeska was efficient in classical tragedy and emotional drama. It is told of her (in Skinner's Family Circle) that once at a banquet she gave a recitation in Polish. "Her liquid voice became by turns melancholy, gay, and tragic. There was not a note in the gamut of emotions she did not sound. The audience was kept spellbound, and when she had completed her recitation, she was asked what it had been. Madame Modjeska replied with a sly smile, 'I merely recited the alphabet.'"

At her first appearance here Modjeska gave Camille with Robert Mantell as her leading man. After the performance the students, who had become her slaves, went in a body to her private railway coach and serenaded the lady. It had been a gala occasion. Modjeska appeared here 6 times between 1878 and 1893, as follows:

December 19, 1878, in Camille, with Robert Mantell
March 15, 1887, in Adrienne, with Maurice Barrymore
January 10, 1888, in Twelfth Night, with George Vanderhoff
February 1, 1892, in As You Like It, with T. S. Thalberg
January 23, 1893, in Macbeth, with Otis Skinner
October 20, 1893, in Merchant of Venice, with Otis Skinner and Maude Durbin

So Ann Arbor had many chances to appraise the art of this lovely, sympathetic, and brilliant woman.

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* Helena Modjeska, born 1844, retired 1905, died 1909.

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December 19, 1878, in Camille, with Robert Mantell
March 25, 1887, in Adrienne, with Maurice Barrymore
January 20, 1888, in Twelfth Night, with George Vandenhoff
February 1, 1889, in As You Like It, with J. E. Dallberg
January 29, 1890, in Magda, with Otis Skinner
October 20, 1890, in Merchant of Venice, with Otis Skinner and Maude Durbin
In Ann Arbored many chances to appreciate the art of this lovely, sympathetic, and brilliant woman.

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* Helena Modjeska, born 1844, retired 1907, died 1909.

1879 proved a busy year on the stage in Ann Arbor. There were 47 different productions, with many famous actors, chief of them being Maurice Barrymore and Lawrence Barrett. Maurice Barrymore* came to Ann Arbor for the first time on March 24, 1879, with Frederick Warde in Sardou's Diplomacy. Barrymore had been born in England, came to America in 1875, and the next year married Georgia, daughter of Louisa Drew. They had three children, Lionel, Ethel, and John. Barrymore was the leading man for Mrs. Fiske, Lily Langtry, and Helena Modjeska. It is said that Modjeska converted the Barrymores to Catholicism. Besides being a handsome man, Barrymore was a noted wit. One of the stories told about him says that once a friend approached him and asked whether he had heard the latest bit of gossip. "No," replied Barrymore, "I shave myself!"

Lawrence Barrett** is often claimed as a Detroit actor. Though he was born in Paterson, New Jersey, he was brought to Detroit at the age of 9. Five years later he became a call-boy at the old Metropolitan Theatre. He rose to the position of leading man in the stock company in three years, then left for the east and a great career. Barrett was noted for his elocution and the purity of his style in acting, influenced to some extent by Charlotte Cushman and Edwin Booth. He was an excellent interpreter of character, and was considered one of the greatest scholars on the stage. Barrett made five appearances in Ann Arbor:

October 16, 1879, in Hamlet, with Eben Plympton
May 5, 1880, in Richelieu
August 20, 1880, in Julius Caesar, with Louis James
October 21, 1884, in Francesco da Rimini
May 7, 1888, in Julius Caesar, with Edwin Booth

In his fifth appearance, Lawrence Barrett was acting as manager as well as co-starring with Edwin Booth. The combination of talent was an impressive one. It can be said without fear of contradiction that neither before or since has Ann Arbor seen a greater production, for here we have the world's greatest playwright represented by one of his best plays, and acted by two of America's finest actors. When Barrett died in 1891, William Winter, New York dramatic critic, said that the stage had lost its noblest actor. And when Edwin Booth died two years later, the American Theatre lost its greatest actor who, in my opinion, has never been equalled, much less excelled.

In 1880, there were well over a hundred important actors in Ann Arbor, performing in 44 plays. The most spectacular was the famous English actress, Adelaide Neilson, who had come west on her fourth tour of the United States. She was a ravishingly pretty creature, with a good measure of acting ability. She could portray affection fervently, and emotional passion in a thrilling manner. Some critics thought she had become too buxom in 1880 for the part of Viola in Twelfth Night, which was the play she gave in Ann Arbor, but doubtless it was an exciting evening.

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* Maurice Barrymore, born 1848, died 1905.
** Lawrence Barrett, born 1837, died 1891.

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Lawrence Barrett** is often claimed as a Detroit actor. Though he was born in Paterson, New Jersey, he came to Detroit at the age of 9. Five years later he became a call-boy at the old Metropolitan Theatre. He rose to the position of leading man in the stock company in three years, then left for the east and a great career. Barrett was noted for his elocution and the purity of his style in acting. Influenced to some extent by Charlotte Cushman and Edwin Booth. He was an excellent interpreter of Shakespeare, and was considered one of the greatest scholars on the stage. Barrett made five appearances in Ann Arbor:

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May 5, 1880, in Othello
August 20, 1880, in Julius Caesar, with Louis Aldrich
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May 7, 1886, in Virginius, with Edwin Booth

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* Maurice Barrymore, born 1848, died 1905.
** Lawrence Barrett, born 1837, died 1891.

There were 54 productions in Hill's Opera House in 1882. The most important actress to appear was Fanny Janauschek.* She was born in Prague, Bohemia, and rose to great heights on the German stage. She had acquired some fabulous jewels, about which she received much publicity. She played in the German language until 1871, when she had been in the United States for several years. When she learned English, she spoke it with quite a gutteral accent. Janauschek won her fame as a tragic actress, come critics claiming that she was the greatest of all the foreign actresses who came here; but she was never as popular as the Italian Ristori nor the Polish Modjeska. Her roles in Ann Arbor were six:

October 18, 1882, in Mary Stuart (Schiller)
April 7, 1884, in Zillah, the Hebrew Mother
April 8, 1884, in Marie Antoinette (Giocometti)
November 22, 1886, in Meg Merrilies
March 10, 1890, in Macbeth
March 8, 1893, in Mary, Queen of Scots, tr. by Janauschek

January 5, 1885, the twenty-year old Minnie Maddern** (afterward Mrs. Fiske) made her first appearance in Caprice, with Henry Miller. This actress was to become one of the most famous of American stars. She was noted for her chopped-off sentences, her head tossing, and her intellectual approach to the drama. She developed into rather a temperamental person, and when she appeared here in 1904 she was dreadfully annoyed to find that the seat sale for Hedda Gabler was very meager. When she granted an interview to a University of Michigan reporter, she said that she had expected sympathetic understanding of the play. She thought it should have been studied in the classroom, and that the theatre should have been packed with students; but that apparently the professors were utterly at sea when it came to an appreciation of great drama. During the performance of the play the students ate peanuts, and the crackle of the shells so annoyed Mrs. Fiske that she rang down the curtain for a time. The Ann Arbor Times took the occasion, in its report of the play, to retort, "The irritable actress promises not to return to Ann Arbor. The town will survive!"

Four years later, on January 18, 1889, Julia Marlow,*** then 19 years old, made her first appearance in Ann Arbor, with Robert Taber, whom she married five years later. They enacted the old standard drama, Ingomar, the play in which she had made her debut as a star two years before her Ann Arbor visit. Miss Marlowe was a handsome woman, with a cleft chin, large dark eyes, and a voice of unearthly beauty. She was endowed with great personal charm, and as Parthenia in Ingomar, she displayed a dash of feminine coquetry. She studied assiduously and acquired a deep knowledge of various Shakespearian roles, in which she and her second husband, E. H. Sothern, starred for many years. Miss Marlowe retired from the stage in 1924, and has been living in New York City, where she died only last November.

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* Fanny Janauschek, born 1830, died 1904.
** Minnie Maddern Fiske, Born 1865, debut at 3, married at 23, d.1932
***Julia Marlowe, born 1870 in Scotland, came to USA 1872, debut 1887, married Taber 1894, married Sothern 1911, died 1950.

There were 54 productions in Hill's Opera House in 1882.
The most important actress to appear was Fanny Janauschek.* She was born in Prague, Bohemia, and rose to great heights on the German stage. She had acquired some fabulous jewels, about which she received much publicity. She played in the German language until 1871, when she had been in the United States for several years. When she learned English, she spoke it with quite a guttural accent. Janauschek was her name as a stage actress, some critics claiming that she was the greatest of all the foreign actresses who came here; but she was never as popular as the Italian Ristori nor the Polish Modjeska. Her roles in Ann Arbor were six:

October 18, 1882, in Lady Macbeth (Schiller)
April 4, 1884, in Mirandolina, Queen of Hearts
April 6, 1884, in Marie Antoinette (Broomsetti)
November 24, 1885, in Queen Elizabeth
March 10, 1890, in Medea
March 6, 1891, in Mary, Queen of Scots, Sr. by Janauschek

January 5, 1895, the twenty-year old Minnie Maddern** (afterward Mrs. Fiske) made her first appearance in Dunstan, with Henry Miller. This actress was to become one of the most famous of American stars. She was noted for her choice-of-self sentenced, her head tossing, and her intellectual approach to the drama. She developed into rather a temperamental person, and when she appeared here in 1904 she was dreadfully angered to find that the seat made for Hedda Gabler was very meager. When she granted an interview to Michigan Alumnus, she said that she had expected sympathetic understanding of the play. She thought it should have been studied in the classroom, and that the theatre should have been packed with students, but that apparently the professors were utterly at sea when it came to an appreciation of great drama. During the performance of the play the students ate peanuts, and the crackle of the shells so annoyed her. Fiske that she rang down the curtain for a time. The Ann Arbor Times took the occasion, in its report of the play, to report that "the irritable actress promises not to return to Ann Arbor. The feeling will survive!"

Four years later, on January 18, 1899, Julia Marlowe,*** then 19 years old, made her first appearance in Ann Arbor, with Robert Taber, whom she married five years later. They enacted the old standard drama, Lucrezia, the play in which she had made her debut as a star two years before her Ann Arbor visit. Miss Marlowe was a handsome woman, with a pleasing chin, large dark eyes, and a voice of unusually beauty. She was endowed with great personal charm, and as Lucrezia in Lucrezia, she displayed a dash of romantic coquetry. She studied assiduously and acquired a deep knowledge of various Shakespearian roles, in which she and her second husband, E. H. Sothern, starred for many years. Miss Marlowe retired from the stage in 1924, and has been living in New York City, where she died only last November.

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** Minnie Maddern Fiske, born 1865, debut at 5, married at 23, d. 1932
*** Julia Marlowe, born 1870 in Scotland, came to USA 1872, debut 1887, married Taber 1894, married Sothern 1911, died 1950.

March 1, 1899, one of the most beloved of American actresses came to town. Jessie Bonstelle made her first appearance here in a play called Chip o' the Block. Miss Bonstelle had a summer stock company in Detroit from 1910 until 1924. January 1, 1925, she opened up in her own playhouse, the converted Temple Beth El. When Jessie Bonstelle died, in 1932, she was mourned from one end of the country to the other, for she had been instrumental in giving many a budding actor a chance to prove his mettle. Among those who credited her with helping them were Katherine Cornell, Katherine Alexander, Melvyn Douglas, Minor Watson, and George Blackwood.

Otis Skinner* made his first appearance here on January 23, 1893, as leading man to Modjeska in Macbeth. In her delightful book, Family Circle, Cornelia Otis Skinner tells of the life of her father and of her mother, Maude Durbin. Miss Durbin joined the Modjeska company in the fall of 1893, and was taken under the wing of the great actress. Later, when Otis Skinner decided to leave the Modjeska company and tour as a star, Madame Modjeska kept at him until he signed Maude Durbin up as his leading lady. Soon after that they fell in love and were married.

The tours were difficult, the box-office showing meager results for their good acting. However, the young couple were not greatly discouraged, and enjoyed their life together. Once in Kansas City Maude overheard a small boy who had been reading their sign-board say to his mother, "Ma, what is an ottis skinner?" "I dunno," she replied, "some sort of a farm implement, I reckon." On his struggling way to California, Otis received a note from a fellow player. "Dear Skinner," he wrote, "I hear you are about to go west. Don't. The plains are white with the bones of actors who tried to get back."

Mr. Skinner's Ann Arbor appearances were:
January 23, 1893, in Macbeth, with Madame Modjeska
October 21, 1893, in Merchant of Venice, with Modjeska
November 9, 1896, in Hamlet, with Maude Durbin
February 15, 1898, in Prince Rudolph, with Maude Durbin
March 10, 1899, in Rosemary, with Dorothy Cruikshanks

Maude Adams** and John Drew came to Ann Arbor for the first time on September 20, 1893, in a play by Clyde Fitch called The Masked Ball. Miss Adams had first appeared, at the age of 5, on the stage with J. K. Emmet in Fritz, our German Cousin. The Masked Ball was the first play in which she had a prominent part. She became a star four years after her Ann Arbor engagement, as Babbie in Little Minister. From then on she was under Charles Frohman's management, mostly in J. M. Barrie's delightful plays, where the word "charm" was constantly used in describing both the plays and the actress. Maude Adams was the most beloved actress of her generation.

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* Otis Skinner, born 1858, about 1877, retired 1925, died 1942.
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John Drew,* who played the lead in The Masked Ball, was the son of Louisa Drew, the most famous comedian of her day. John began his career in Philadelphia in his mother's theatre. Later he went to New York, where under the Augustin Daly banner he starred opposite Ada Rehan. Drew's most famous role was Petruchio in Taming of the Shrew. He achieved considerable fame as the best dressed man on the American stage. He was called "the glass of fashion and the mould of form," and was known as the best actor of romantic drama in his generation.

December 18, 1895, Mrs. General Tom Thumb, then 53 years old, brought a troupe of Liliputians, 12 in number, to Ann Arbor. Among them were the well-known midgets, Count and Baron Magri. None of them achieved the fame that Tom Thumb reached before his death, but they were well received, nonetheless.

In 1899 there were 95 different plays on the legitimate stage in Ann Arbor, the most famous being Arizona, with a star-studded cast, among them Theodore Roberts, Vincent Serrano, Lionel Barrymore, and Eleanor Robson. This brings us up to 1900. In the 45 years of the legitimate stage in Ann Arbor, 1,289 performances were given. If they averaged 7 people to a cast, there must have been 9,023 actors who contributed to the entertainment of our town folk. Compared to the barren theatre of today, that of the by-gone days seems most impressive.

## Amateur Performances

There follows a brief account of the amateur stage in Ann Arbor, not including the numerous dramatic activities at the University of Michigan.

The first performance of any kind in Ann Arbor on the local stage was given May 25, 1837, only 13 years after the town was founded. The play was the old standby of all stock companies, Pizarro, by Kotzebue, translated by Sheridan. The local Thespian Society gave it in the E. M. Terry Hall.** The Ladies Library Association gave many tableaux and plays during the years from 1861 to 1875, all of them being staged in Hangsterfer Hall, on the corner of Washington and Main Streets.

One local event of special interest to this Society was the first appearance of the sweet-voiced singer, Miss Pauline Widenmann, then in her teens. Miss Marie Rominger tells me that schools were closed when The Naiad Queen was produced, January 19, 1874, for most of the pupils were either on the stage or in the audience. Miss Widenmann later became the wife of Ruben Kempf, and was to be the leading singer in the various musicals which he directed.

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** The writer has been unable to find any evidence of the location of E. M. Terry Hall, and would welcome any information on the matter.

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There were two Barrett Clubs, named after the famous actor, the first functioned in 1871, the second in 1878. Among the members of the latter group were C. M. Jones, Charles Hiscock, Walter Park, Charles Donnelly, John Keating, Charles Richards, Gillie Pitkin, Michael and John Sheehan. Among the most prolific producers of plays, minstrel shows, and other forms of entertainment, were Jim Harkins and Ross Granger. They were generally the principal actors in each of their productions. Their names first appear November 13, 1879, when they gave a play called Motive Power, and a minstrel show. From then on they acted frequently year after year. Frank Hangsterfer was first mentioned January 16, 1880, when he had a play in Hangsterfer Hall called Where Is My Boy Tonight?

Mr. Ruben Kempf's first musical was Trial by Jury, the first of the Gilbert and Sullivan operas that he directed. The members of the cast were the Lyra Choral Society, with Mrs. Kempf and Minnie Davis in the feminine leads, and Jay Taylor as the masculine lead. The Ann Arbor Zither Club furnished the background music. The date was May 10, 1893. A year later, on April 10-11, the Lyra Society again presented a Gilbert and Sullivan opera, this time H. M. S. Pinafore, in conjunction with the University Glee Club, directed by Mr. Kempf. Among the singers who had leading parts were Herman Allmendinger, George Bliss, Luella Granger, Elsa Kempf, Mrs. W. L. Taylor, and Mrs. Ruben Kempf as Buttercup.

May 28, 1895, was a red-letter day in my life, for I then appeared in a very minor role in The Mikado (Gilbert and Sullivan), supporting such stars as George Bliss as the Mikado, Elizabeth Milspaugh as Yum Yum, and Mrs. Kempf as Katisha. That my name did not appear in the newspaper account of the event has been a great blow to my pride. I was then 11 years of age. On June 9, 1898, I made my second appearance, again neglected by the press. The opera given was The Tyrolean Queen. The lead was taken by Fred Daly, that glorious-voiced boy, who in my opinion has never been excelled as a boy singer in this locality. Luella Granger was the Fairy Queen, and Miss Caspary was the Gypsy Queen. These and others in the cast, such as Lulu Liesemer, Eva Bogle, Catherine Schaeberle, Southard Cutting, and Lawrence Whitset, received fulsome praise.

There were various church entertainments given throughout the years, especially by the Catholic, the Presbyterian, and the Unitarian churches.

A number of Ann Arborites who first appeared as amateurs were later to achieve a career on the legitimate stage. Among these were: John Burleigh, who had been editor of the Ann Arbor Democrat in 1878, a year later became a Shakespearian actor and toured the country in 1881. J. C. Taylor and his wife, previously mentioned as local singers, became members of a professional opera troupe in 1893. DeWitt Millen was lucky enough to become a member of the Modjeska-James company in 1902, and was later, 1904, with the James K. Hackett company. DeHull Travis, who had been successful as a local

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high-school and University actor, decided to become a professional player. He was connected with the M. B. Streeter stock company, the Empire Theatre company of Toledo, the Blaney stock company of Brooklyn, and the Eugenia Blair stock company.

Perhaps the most famous of all the local Thespians was Frank McIntyre, who had been associated with the St. Thomas Dramatic Club, which performed Boucicault's play, Colleen Bawn, March 16, 1897. Mr. McIntyre directed many a play for the Catholic organization, until he decided to become a legitimate actor. He made his first professional appearance September 28, 1901, in Rome, New York. Frank first came to Ann Arbor as a legitimate actor, December 23, 1907, in The Honorable John Grigsby. His most popular success was as a star in The Traveling Salesman. Toward the end of his career, Mr. McIntyre was connected with radio. When he retired he came back to Ann Arbor, where he died in June, 1949.

During the 62 years of the amateur stage, from 1837-1900, 112 performances were given for the public. Today the amateur stage is very much alive, doing exceedingly interesting plays in a creditable, almost professional manner.

Now I shall say with Shakespeare in the closing lines of his Pericles:

> "So on your patience evermore attending
> New joy wait on you! Here our tale hath ending."

Ann Arbor, Michigan
December 7, 1950

Mrs. I. Wm. Groomes

1209 S. State

Ann Arbor, Mich